

THE ROLE OF THE CHAPLAIN IN THE
CORRECTIONAL MILIEU

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Chaplain Reserve Component General Staff Course

by

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The role of a chaplain in the correctional milieu is one of tension and ambivalence. The area of tension is: the chaplain must walk a tightrope between staff and inmates. The symbolism of a tightrope is used because a tightrope is, for the most part, never in a constant position. The chaplain walks this tightrope between staff and inmates, serving both. He cannot be a yes-man to the staff to the extent that he loses the respect of the inmates, nor can he allow himself to be conned by the inmates to the point that he loses the respect of the staff.¹ It is imperative that the chaplain not be blown with the wind, but rather never afraid to take the side of right. The chaplain must show concern and interest in individuals, staff or inmates to the extent that all know someone cares. This is the only way some may ever know, and hopefully accept, the fact that God loves and cares for them. A correctional chaplain must be willing to be conned (and many times is) to minister to those he serves. The chaplain who is not willing to be conned will be in such a state of paranoia he will not be able to function effectively.

The area of most ambivalence is how the correctional chaplain sees himself and how others see him. In times gone by, the chaplain was able to

¹ Carl Hart, "The Long Thin Line of Trust," Home Missions, Vol XLIII, No XI (November 1972), pp. 19-23 & 56-57.

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confine his ministry along the guidelines of a particular denomination or religion. The correctional chaplain of today must lead or provide for the religious needs of individuals as requested. This is where "cooperation without compromise" comes into effect. A chaplain is not required to lead or perform those religious services, functions, etc. that are different from his personal religious convictions, but he must be willing to provide that which he cannot lead.

The role of the correctional chaplain has changed as the role of prisons has changed. In times past, prisons were: a place where an inmate was sent to be punished, a place to be sent as punishment, and a holding place until execution was carried out.² The early chaplain's chief function was to prepare the condemned to die. The role of the chaplain has undertaken many changes and traveled through various functions. Two major factors are the reasons for the most significant aspects of this change. These two factors are: the increase in other professional staff, and the requirements in the area of chaplaincy training.

First, consider the increase in other professional staff. Who are these persons? They are: recreation and educational consultants, teachers, coaches, social-service specialists, psychologists, and psychiatrists, just to name a few. With the employment of these other professionals, the chaplain's role has become more narrowly and clearly defined. The correctional chaplain does not have to be all things to all people, but he must be consciously aware that he is on a tightrope. With the tightrope

² Hylon Vickers, "The Place of Religion and a Religious Program in Adult Corrections" (Unpublished Masters Thesis, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas, August, 1971), pp. 21-29.

swinging from side to side, it is a most uncomfortable position. This is where a correctional chaplain must stay to minister to both staff and inmates. The chaplain should be there, and be visible, to meet the needs of staff and inmates as needed or requested. This often places the chaplain in the middle, and he should be well aware of this.

Secondly, what are the training requirements for the correctional chaplaincy? They are much the same as those required for other types of chaplaincy: ordination, college degree, seminary degree or other similar advanced degree, one to three years of pastoral experience, and one year of clinical pastoral education or some acceptable equivalent. These requirements may vary from state to state and/or department to department.

Staff Expectations of the Correctional Chaplain

The staff will expect much from a chaplain working in the correctional setting. Regardless of what one's personal feelings are, a chaplain must realize that security is the name of the game and it takes precedence over everything else. While working in a correctional setting, one does not work around the boundaries of security, but within the limits as defined by the institution. The reason for this restraint is that the chaplain may encounter some hesitation on the part of some of the staff to trust and accept him. He will have to prove himself to the staff just as he will have to prove himself to the inmates. The primary concern of his working environment is custody and safekeeping. The work is security orientated. If he tries to understand the staff's position, they will try to better understand him. If he has any doubt as to whether he should or should not do something, then he should ask. For example, if a question arises as to what might be contraband, or what might be considered confidential, he must ask

someone in a position of authority on the staff. The staff will be more willing to respect him if he shows a genuine desire to learn. A person should not be critical about that which he does not understand and should seek an explanation. There may be a very valid reason which is not clear to him. If he sees something he believes is in need of a change, then he should take this recommendation to a staff supervisor and discuss it with him.³

Self-expectations of the Correctional Chaplain

Working with inmates cannot be reduced to "cookbook" form. Many factors will be left to the good judgment of the correctional chaplain. If there is a guideline that stands out before others it is: Be yourself; do not be a phony. One of the most important ways to show concern is the honest expression of one's feelings. Be patient; do not expect an instantaneous miracle. Things may have been going wrong for years. Many things cannot be corrected in a short time. It sometimes takes years to undo that which has been done in the past. You must win the respect of inmates. They will never respect those whom they can con or manipulate. (To win the respect of inmates, you must respect their individuality.) If you are in the correctional chaplaincy for the instant rewards, e.g. thanks etc., forget it. You may never hear a thank you, but you will see efforts in the long run.⁴

An additional new and most important emerging role for the correctional chaplain is to be the liaison between the institution and religious volunteers, and between religious volunteers and the inmates. Resources from

³"How Christians Can Be Involved in Jail and Prison Ministry," International Prison Ministry, Dallas, Texas, (1980), pp. 2-3.

⁴"A Handbook for Volunteers in Corrections," American Correctional Association, College Park, Maryland, (1978), pp. 7-8.

the religious community are very frequently directed towards inmates. A well-organized chaplaincy program helps to utilize these resources.

In the past most inmates attending religious services were either Catholic or Protestant. Today's chaplain has a much broader spectrum of religious groups. As previously stated in this paper, he is not required to lead or perform those religious services/functions etc. that are different from his personal convictions, but he must be willing to provide that which he cannot or will not lead himself.

In the eighteenth chapter of the Book of Exodus, Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, called it to Moses' attention that he could not do everything or be all things to all men. To say it another way, Moses had to be told he could not do it all himself. Most chaplains are finding this out very quickly themselves; some have to have a shock treatment or two (heart attack, ulcer, etc.) before they see this need. This is where the need for religious volunteers surfaces. These religious volunteers may be clergy and/or laity.⁵

In this new role the chaplain has many more responsibilities. Frequently, the mantle of screening, training, and the supervision of the volunteers falls upon the chaplain. If there is not adequate screening, training, and supervision of religious volunteers, the religious program may become a joke to the staff and the inmates quickly learn those whom they may take advantage of.⁶ Also the chaplain must be aware that all who wish to be religious volunteers do not have what it takes to effectively minister in the

⁵ Lewis A. Williams, "What the Chaplain Expects from Volunteers," APCCA Journal, Vol. IV, No. I (Spring-Summer, 1979), pp. 33-34.

⁶ Emmett Solomon, "Correctional Chaplaincy...Ministering to the Incarcerated," Texas Journal of Corrections, (September/October 1983), pp. 5 & 9.

correctional milieu. Some religious groups may not necessarily like the fact, but a correctional chaplain must prevent all attempts at proselyting. Constitutionally, all religious activities must be voluntary, no hitting over the head with the Bible, the Torah, the Koran, or whatever the book of choice is.

The correctional chaplain, at any given time, may be asked to serve in many roles: pastor, priest, counselor, preacher, shepherd, friend, etc. In whatever role the chaplain of today is called to serve, this role will be more or less confined to the areas of family and religious matters. Both of these areas have become more complicated as prisons change.

What Are Inmates Generally Like?

We should examine what inmates are generally like. The average inmate in an American prison is twenty-one to twenty-three years of age. Subsequently, they are impulsive, immature, and given to fantasy. The academic maturity of the inmate is below normal, and this goes hand-in-hand with spiritual immaturity. For example, the average inmate has below a sixth-grade education level. He is generally bewildered and frustrated in his attempts to make adjustments to his problems. If a believer, he may feel God has "let him down," and doubts His power. The author of this paper has found the average inmate has a tendency to be involved in plea bargaining. Most people understand what this term means in reference to the courts, but not in reference to the total correctional milieu. Yes, inmates do plea bargain with the courts to receive a lesser sentence, fine, etc. Also, inmates extensively plea bargain with God. This is closely equated with the term "fox hole religion." For example, God if you will get me out of this, get me a smaller sentence, etc. I will go to church or whatever you want me to do.

Tragically they are trying to fool God, when all they are doing is fooling themselves.

The inmates "shell" is often nearly impregnable. They are withdrawn from reality to a point of being defensive, hostile, fearful, and overaggressive. The inmate's self-image is usually in need of much improvement. Besides failing in an academic life, family life, and possible married life, he has failed at crime--he got caught. He may feel that he is a victim of injustice. He will blame everyone else (police, judges, lawyers, schools, society in general, parents, wife, etc.) for his incarceration. He refuses to accept the fact, he is personally responsible. He joins other inmates in expressing hostility against the law and other authorities. He may say, "They put me here." This is regardless of guilt or innocence. He has lost his self-esteem and now may put up a false front of the "big, bad, tough" or some other projected false self-image. He does not wish to be portrayed as a failure.

The inmate generally comes from a background which included a broken family, alcoholism, drug abuse, and a noticable "loose" family moral code. Poverty, also, is a high governing factor in the background of an inmate. We are dealing with a virtual child of the world, who has never known much, if any security in his life.

The inmate can be classified into three general categories. The first category would be those inmates who do have family and friends that will back them all the way. Secondly, there are those who have no one, coming from a broken home or child-care institutions. The third group is essentially the most aloof of the three. Loved ones may be out there, but no real affection or concern has ever been expressed. No real ties have ever existed. For this man, committing a crime could have been a cry for help, or an attempt

to be noticed. Keep in mind that these descriptions of inmates are generalities, and there are always exceptions to the rule. A chaplain should not fall into the trap of classifying all inmates as being alike; instead he should try to accept inmates as persons, who may have individual problems.

Many problems that inmates have evolve out of family relationships. It is not easy to work with the families of inmates. Some inmates and their families wish to make no contact with each other. Many families live too far way to visit; therefore, they cannot maintain close family ties. Family correspondence is another problem. Some inmates and their family members can neither read nor write. Telephone privileges are usually limited or nonexistent. The chaplain thus becomes a major link to the outside world. Many inmates have come to believe (whether based on fact or not), that they have been forgotten by their families. The chaplain can write letters and make telephone calls to help erase the fear based upon the unknown.

The inmate's relationship with his God is a factor the prison chaplain must be aware of. At best, the inmate has a very limited spiritual background and an inadequate self-image. The average inmate trusts no one because he has nowhere to place his trust. Therefore, he must first come to trust someone besides himself, and accept himself as a person of worth. A young psychiatric patient once said, "I am good, because God does not make any junk." This says a great deal to the person who has a distorted view of himself. One of the most important responsibilities the prison chaplain has, is to help those whom he serves come into a closer relationship with their God.

The Bible has much to say as to the importance of a man to God. Genesis 1:27 speaks of how God made man like Himself; in Matthew 19:19, Jesus spoke to the rich young man about self-love; and in John 3:16, we are told of God giving His only Son, that if we believe in Him, we can live forever. These are only three examples of many that show how important we are to God. It is most important that the prison chaplain be the one who points those he serves to a more personal relationship with God. Now let us look at some examples of the typical inmate: R. D. (initials are used for obvious reasons) is a twenty-three year old white male with an educational aptitude of the average second or third grader. His parents are deceased and he was raised by an elderly aunt (she is in her seventies). It is suspected that he may be mentally retarded. He may just be culturally retarded. R. D. is also a child in his relationship with his god.

B. H. is a twenty-two year old black male with a similar educational aptitude as R. D. He comes from a broken home. His mother is an alcoholic and left home when B. H. was very young. B. H. is very impulsive in his behavior. This impulsiveness carries over into his religious experience(s).

D. C. is a twenty-six year old white male with an educational aptitude on the doctoral level. He also comes from a broken home. Even though he is older and has attained a high educational level, he is much like the other two in the fact he is impulsive. In his religious experience, he has a tendency to judge all others by what he calls right or by what he has experienced.

In speaking of a childlike relationship to God, let it be understood in this paper, it is equated to how a very young child responds and/or reacts.

One might say some of these men are children in the body of an adult, but never will grow up. This is in reference to psychological and spiritual maturity.

What Does An Inmate Need?

What does an inmate need? He needs a friend he can trust. This friend may be another inmate, correctional officer, volunteer, chaplain, or a friend from the outside. This friend must be willing to listen, listen more than talk, without being judgmental or making the inmate feel that he is being put down. This friend must be one who shares true concern. The inmate needs to develop worthwhile relationships. These relationships must be based on mutual respect, trust, honesty, and understanding. Most inmates need to develop a realistic self-image of himself as he plans his adjustment to personal problems, and regains his self-confidence and respect for himself. He needs to know you care for him and that you do not fall for the games he may try to play with/on you, but that you will continue to accept him in spite of these games. Most importantly, he needs to know that God loves him and cares for him. The primary and most important thing a correctional chaplain can do is to point, assist, and lead an inmate into a personal relationship with his God. When he comes to accept himself and comes to the realization that God loves him in spite of his actions, past and present, he is then in a better position to accept the love of God, love of others, love himself, and love in return.⁷

⁷"How Christians Can Be Involved in Jail and Prison Ministry," op. cit., pp. 3-4.

General Guidelines for the Correctional Chaplain

One of the most asked questions, is "How am I to act?" Be yourself; do not try to be someone or something you are not. You may not be speaking the inmate's language, but you will find a common ground. Say what you mean, and be honest. What the chaplain does and says will make a direct determination of how effective he is. Inmates can be very discerning critics. He should not be defensive. He cannot show any fear of the inmate population. He should not show any reservations about being there, or doing what he sets out to accomplish. If he has any doubts or fears, he should get out.

The chaplain should be personable with the inmates. He should share the incidents of his daily life with them, and ask them to do likewise. He should show his ability to laugh, because humor is an excellent icebreaker with the inmates. He should invite the inmate to be open, but not prying. He may ask personal questions, but he should not show resentment. The chaplain should not ask an inmate what particular crime he has been convicted of, unless the inmate expresses a desire to talk about the incident. The chaplain should be a friend, but should not do anything for an inmate which he can do for himself. Each of us must learn how to row our own boats. If there is one word of advice, it would be to listen.⁸

How does the prison chaplain measure if his ministry is a success? He cannot base it on counting heads, as there are many sincere, devout, practitioners of their own religious faith who never enter the chapel. Peer pressure is extremely heavy in prison. Many do not want to be called a "Holy Joe," etc. They may study their Bible, Koran, or other religious materials

⁸Williams, loc. cit.

in the privacy of their own cells. They may come to talk with the chaplain on a one-on-one basis about their religious convictions. This all depends upon the amount of trust the inmate has in the chaplain. An inmate once said in an article he wrote, "The chaplain doesn't talk about how he cares, as a rule, instead he tries to show it simply in the things he does and in his being here . . ."⁹ This, and by seeing men go home and never to return to prison, is how prison chaplains measure their success.

Earlier in this paper it was alluded to that the correctional chaplain often ministers to the staff. Not all chaplains see the staff as part of their area of ministry. These chaplains are often overlooking a segment of many needs. The staff, quite frequently because of their hours and sometimes because of their paranoia do not trust those on the outside. The paranoia in the correctional milieu is not always viewed as negative or covering one's own actions. It is just being aware of what is going on around him.

The correctional chaplain who effectively ministers to all will be with the inmates and with the staff, but never a total part of either. Again this is the position on the tightrope. This is the cutting edge for the correctional chaplain.

The correctional chaplain must convey concern and interest in individuals to the extent they know someone does care. Most importantly, he must convey the message, regardless of the amount of care and concern any chaplain shows, that God cares more! This will give some hope when there appears to be none. The correctional chaplain, "Bring God to men, men to God, and himself to both."⁹

⁹ Edward A. Crochet, "Christmas Service at Central," Central Chronicle, Vol III (January, 1983), pp. 17 & 18.

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